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# Reading, Writing, and the Library: A Perfect Integration for Students Today

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# Reading, Writing, and the Library: A Perfect Integration for Students Today

by **Davonna Thomas** (English Instructor and Developmental Coordinator, Coastal Carolina Community College, Jacksonville, NC) <thomasd@coastalcarolina.edu>

Attention college librarians: Perhaps you've noticed some new faces at your library, or maybe you're receiving an increased number of information literacy session requests. Have you been approached by anxious, bewildered students who have been sent over by their developmental English instructors? If you haven't experienced one or more of these things yet, I foresee them in your future, for developmental reading and writing instruction is undergoing a shift.

This change in the curricular landscape directly impacts libraries and librarians: particularly those who serve community colleges and four-year institutions with open admissions policies. In order to meet the unique needs of these students, developmental instructors, librarians, and writing center staff must join forces by sharing processes, resources, and best practices, especially in times of systemic change. This article seeks to describe the current situation, provide a brief history of college reading instruction, explain the shifting instructional paradigm, and identify some general and specific ways in which instructors can collaborate with college librarians to best serve our developmental reading and writing students.

Every other year, the **National Center for Education Statistics (NCES)** administers the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) to measure mathematics and reading outcomes for K-12 students. The findings are referred to as the "Nation's Report Card." The 2013 numbers are hot off the presses. Based on NAEP data, 32% of fourth graders and 22% of eighth graders did not score at or above "basic" on reading comprehension, which is defined as "partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills that are fundamental for proficient work" at a given grade level. Research shows that students who are struggling in the eighth grade fall even further behind during the high school years. Many of these students walk away with diplomas in hand, excited about going to college in the fall. They attend orientation, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, plod through the requisite placement tests for English and mathematics, and they are dismayed to find out that their first-year course plans have been derailed due to mandatory developmental coursework.

All of these factors weigh heavily on my mind as a developmental coordinator and instructor at a community college. When I meet a new group of developmental students, one of the first things I do is facilitate a brainstorm of "all the things you can and should do" with a text. Students often only make it as far as "read it," "take notes," and "write a paper about it." Some of the things they miss might seem painfully obvious to someone already entrenched in mainstream academia: asking questions to clarify meaning, relating person-

ally to the text, agreeing or disagreeing, and making connections with other texts are only a few examples. Students enter developmental courses seemingly unable to connect with an assigned text. This is not to say that they are incapable of asking, connecting, disagreeing, and discussing. On the contrary, developmental students are particularly adept at these skills — listening to them chat in the hallway before class is proof positive.

*What happens when these students walk into the classroom, then?* Unfortunately, many students have been shut out and thus "shut down" by the educational system. While many educators and administrators have shifted towards a more student-centered ideology that values identity and prior knowledge, students might not necessarily be able to "unlearn" what years of transmission-based teaching have hard-wired into their academic identities. When information is transferred from teacher to student, exploration and inquiry are not encouraged. Students are not allowed to co-construct their own knowledge; thus, they are excluded from participation in the learning process. When students are not engaged in the learning process, they (understandably) detach from the experience. Detached students might be perceived as lazy, but instructors and staff must share the responsibility.

The disconnect between student ability and student success, along with the resulting problems with retention and persistence, has led to an important conversation among the various stakeholders in higher education. Increased research and the resulting discourse have led to a "new" way of thinking about reading and writing as recursive, concurrent processes. If reading and writing are two expressions of the same construct (engaging with a text), then why should they be artificially separated into two different courses? Shouldn't students be taught to consider the writing process while reading and to compose texts with the reader/audience in mind? *How hasn't this always been the way we do things?*

To better understand the nature of and rationale for the current shift in developmental reading and writing instruction, a brief description of the old "skill-based" model is necessary. Traditionally, reading was viewed as a receptive skill (decoding a text); conversely, writing was the productive skill (encoding thoughts into a text). Reading was broken down (artificially) into discrete sub-skills and taught sequentially. For example, students were taught to identify the main idea of a text earlier in the

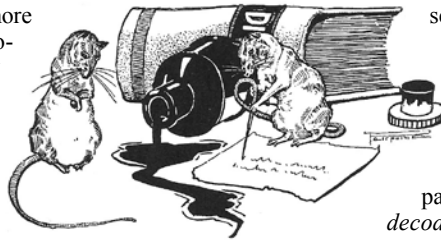
semester and how to draw conclusions a few units later. These sub-skills were practiced and assessed using sustained silent reading (SSR) of dry passages and multiple-choice or short answer drills. After months of this, students were required to pass an exit exam at the end of the semester — typically a standardized multiple-choice reading comprehension test. If students failed the exam, they had to repeat the course, which often meant that a full semester had been lost.

Not only did students fail these courses and disappear from higher education, the students who *were* successful in developmental reading struggled in subsequent courses. The little research on skill-based instruction which existed did not show evidence of efficacy. People at all levels began to question the paradigm. *If students can decode a text but are unable to articulate a meaningful response, does it really count? If students can write grammatical sentences but are unable to engage with a text, does it really count?* After many years of thinking about reading instruction as the addressing of a deficit, the crisis of postsecondary developmental education forced college administrators and instructors to reconsider their common sense assumptions, an act of reflection that has led to the current trend of the formation of integrated reading and writing programs.

The idea of reading and writing integration is by no means "new." The view of reading and writing as components of the same construct dates back to the ancient art of rhetoric, but it wasn't until the late 1800s that colleges and universities articulated the reading-writing connection as it pertains to teaching and learning. Over the next hundred years, the trend of developmental instruction resembled that of a spiral staircase. Every twenty years or so, the idea of integrated instruction would circle back around, each time perhaps arriving at a higher understanding and "sticking" a bit longer. The spiral tightened in light of the 1970s study of language and literacy as cognitive processes and resulted in a succession of important publications.

In the midst of the turn-of-the-century shift from skill-based to holistic, contextualized, integrated reading and writing instruction, a national overhaul of K-12 reading instruction and assessment was underway. The **National Reading Panel (NRP)** was written at the request of the **United States Congress** with support from the **National Institute of Child Health and Human Development** and the

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**United States Department of Education.** The NRP was the first national, wide-ranging, systematic review of reading research.

The result of a review of hundreds of studies was a set of recommendations for K-12 reading instruction. It is important to note that neither skill-based instruction nor sustained silent reading “made the list.” Instead, the NRP recommended a multiple-strategy instruction for the teaching of reading comprehension. The rationale is that comprehension can be improved by teaching students to use specific cognitive strategies or to reason strategically when they encounter barriers to understanding what they are reading. Readers acquire these strategies informally to some extent, but explicit instruction in the application of comprehension strategies has been shown to be highly effective. The teacher demonstrates such strategies for students through modeling and metacognitive “think-alouds” until they are able to carry them out independently. Some of the comprehension strategies recommended by the NRP include self-monitoring of comprehension, cooperative learning, question generation, question answering, and summarization. Please note that the last four listed strategies are definitively acts of composition: yet another strong case made for the integration of reading and writing instruction.

In the spring of 2013, I was collecting data for my dissertation, an investigation of the impact of literature circles (classroom-based book clubs) on reading outcomes for college students. I was especially interested in how the reading-writing connection could enhance comprehension and skill transfer for struggling college students. Still up to my eyeballs in coursework and dissertation drafting, I dreamed of a job market full of developmental integrated reading and writing teaching positions. In a moment of kismet, the **North Carolina Community College** system published a document detailing their new developmental reading and English (DRE) curriculum and course sequence in April 2013, the month I defended my dissertation. A few months later, the **College Reading and Learning Association** commissioned a paper on “The Terrain of College Developmental Reading,” which not only described the shift from skill-based to strategy instruction but also included a subsection on the potential of integrated reading and writing instruction.

A year later, my school (**Coastal Carolina Community College**) is rolling out a full sequence of DRE courses. While it is still very early and there is not yet any data to share, I’m hearing some promising anecdotes from our first-year composition instructors who are “inheriting” our successful DRE students. By all accounts, these students are prepared for the challenges of a college writing course. This pleases but does not surprise me. To move from the final DRE course to the first 100-level composition course, our students must achieve mastery on an essay which synthesizes and documents multiple outside sources. And

where is it that they must find these sources? Their campus library, of course!

The rigor of the new developmental model has created growing pains for students, instructors, and administrators alike. Since we are asking our students to engage with library resources much earlier in the “developmental timeline,” I believe that it’s helpful to explain some of the features of the new developmental courses, as well as features of developmental students, so that librarians will have a fuller understanding of the students who walk through their doors.

**Acceleration:** Developmental programs are implementing accelerated models. In a sense, instructors are being asked to teach twice the content in half the time. Instructors who used to teach a full-semester composition course are now teaching an eight-week reading and composition course. This translates to instructors requesting information literacy sessions only a few weeks into the semester and students working on high-stakes culminating projects at the midterm.

**Streamlining:** Some colleges have adopted streamlining models, in which developmental students register for a standard first-year composition course but also register for a developmental co-requisite. If a student visits the library working on a first-year composition paper, it might be worth asking the student if they are receiving “extra support” in the form of a developmental course. If some students seem to struggle or need extra time during an information literacy session, it could be that they have entered the class already a bit behind in terms of academic preparedness.

**Social/Interactive/Collaborative:** Students are being invited by their developmental instructors to learn in a social, interactive way. More group activities are facilitated during class meetings, and more collaborative projects are being assigned to be completed outside of class. If you haven’t already, consider creating spaces conducive for group research and collaborative composition.

**Critical Thinking:** Some developmental students are being asked to engage in critical thinking for the first time. It is not uncommon for students to resist these challenges at first; they have been indoctrinated with the implicit assumption that any and all independent thinking is the job of the teacher, *not* the student. Please foster critical thinking opportunities whenever possible, and don’t assume that students are incapable because they are initially reluctant.

**Connection-Making:** Developmental course sequences are embedded with scaffolded connection-making. For example, the first course in the NCCC DRE sequence asks students to make text-to-self connections, the second course emphasizes intertextual connections, and the third course emphasizes text-to-world connections. Communicate with developmental instructors to find out where students are in their journey to optimal textual engagement.

**Mastery:** The assessment models of many new developmental courses are unlike that of typical first-year college courses. For exam-

ple, in order to pass a DRE course at **Coastal**, students must achieve mastery on three essays and a final exam. Mastery is set at 80%; if students earn lower than an 80% on an essay, they must revise until mastery is reached. One relatively common scenario is that a student attempts to write a research essay without any outside sources, earns a low score on the first submission, and is sent back to the library to choose sources.

**Affective Domain:** Developmental students struggle more than their non-developmental counterparts with the affective domain. These factors include self-esteem, self-efficacy, attitude, and motivation. As discussed before, students who might appear lazy or cynical are probably dealing with insecurities and anxieties related to their academic identities. If a developmental student is engaging in off-task behavior or acting impatient or frustrated, by all means, work with the instructor to address the situation, but also please remember that the behavior is more likely a symptom of stress than a sign of apathy. While traditional students are able to endure a bit of “boredom” during the learning process, developmental students lose focus more easily and benefit greatly from engaging and *fun* activities.

**Inquiry:** The new developmental courses are built on an inquiry curriculum. As its name indicates, the foundation of an inquiry curriculum is questioning. The questioning process is more the focus than any particular solution or correct answer. The theoretical assumption behind the inquiry curriculum is that students will end up knowing more from the process of working through a process of inquiry, even if the problem at hand is not solved. Much like critical thinking, inquiry is new for most developmental students. Furthermore, teaching inquiry is new for many newly-appointed integrated reading and writing instructors. Be prepared for students who will have questions not just about *how* to do research but also *why* it must be done.

**Transaction:** Reading is no longer viewed as a passive, receptive act. Comprehending a text is an act of transaction. Comprehension takes place when a reader and his/her identity and prior knowledge come into contact with the text to create meaning. Many instructors have shifted from traditional reading quizzes to reader response activities to assess comprehension of a text. Instructors are scaffolding research projects by asking students to first summarize and respond to outside sources before attempting to incorporate them into an essay.

**Processes/Cycles:** Reading and writing are being presented to students as parts of a larger process; a recursive cycle. *Prereading*, *postreading*, and *prewriting* are becoming common vernacular in developmental classrooms. Consider incorporating this cyclical model into library resources and programs.

**Technology:** Many developmental course outcomes now include statements on technology. In fact, many integrated courses include a hybrid or lab component. Developmental courses are utilizing computer labs and instructional technology more than ever before. Be prepared for students who have questions about

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online databases, citation rules for Websites, and word processing applications.

**Plagiarism:** Developmental students struggle with both intentional and accidental plagiarism. Strategies for avoiding plagiarism are included in many developmental course outcomes, and students are being asked to possess a sort of academic literacy, a college student “common sense.” It’s important to understand where students are at in the developmental sequence; for example, whether or not a student has been taught how to paraphrase an outside source will determine much about how an information literacy session should be conducted.

**Disabilities/Accommodations/Other Obstacles:** Developmental classrooms are disproportionately populated with students who have documented disabilities and therefore require learning accommodations. Remember that students end up in developmental classrooms for all sorts of reasons. Some had individual education plans (IEPs) in high school, some are not native English speakers, and still others have reading disabilities such as dyslexia but were never formally diagnosed. In general, developmental students need more time to complete tasks. Consider modifying information literacy sessions to match the reading and processing pace of these students.

Not even one full semester into our own developmental redesign, the English faculty and library staff at **Coastal** have only just begun discussing all the exciting opportunities that have emerged as a result of the new integrated, accelerated model. While I am in no position to recommend a particular program based on evidence of success, I am happy to share some of our early conversations:

**Audiobooks:** Audiobooks are on display in a prime location at our campus library. The typical profile of a student with dyslexia is at or above average oral listening comprehension, so listening to an audiobook allows a struggling student to draw on an already-strong skill and engage meaningfully with a text. Students for whom English is not their native language enjoy listening to a book while following along in the print medium because it assists with fluency and prosody (the rhythm and stress of speech sounds).

**Graphic Novels:** Graphic novels are helpful to developmental students in so many ways. The content of these texts is typically high interest, which is especially important for struggling readers. English learners and students with reading disabilities can latch on to the images to supplement meaning gained from the print.

**Film Adaptation Activities:** Long before I arrived at **Coastal**, the English Division and library staff had established an annual Book-to-Movie event. Students across campus read a chosen novel, prepared responses to discussion prompts, and attended a book talk followed by the screening of the film adaptation. We are discussing the possibility of creating special

developmental book-to-film events which complement the chosen course themes (*food* and *money* are two examples).

**High-Interest, Developmentally Appropriate Fiction:** Only good things can result from multiple exposures to a beloved text, so one nice thing to do is stock your libraries with books that struggling high school readers remember fondly. For example, the **Coastal** library ordered the **Bluford** series, a collection of short, lower Lexile, young adult novellas set in and around an inner city high school. Conveniently, the **Bluford** series is also available online in audio format.

**Low-Pressure Library Visits/Scavenger Hunts:** Instead of conducting traditional information literacy sessions for developmental students, consider structured yet low-pressure library visits. The **Coastal** library staff, along with DRE and first-year composition faculty, are discussing a vertical model of scaffolded info lit sessions designed to minimize unnecessary redundancy and prevent “info lit burnout.” Furthermore, the traditional information literacy format might not line up with a given developmental course’s curriculum and outcomes.

**Developmental Subject Guides:** I am in talks with **Coastal’s** head librarian to create a “libguide” for the DRE course sequence. These courses are scaffolded to guide students from composing sentences to multi-page, multi-sourced research essays; shouldn’t we also scaffold technology, research, and academic literacy? We are planning on a libguide which focuses on the school’s reference database (**Credo**), easy-to-navigate **MLA** guidelines, and reading enjoyment resources.

**Sharing:** **Coastal** hosts a fantastic publication, the *New River Anthology*, which contains works composed by our best students. Each year, selected students perform readings from the publication. I envision a similar but less competitive platform for the sharing of developmental student work. For example, the current theme of the first DRE course is *Everyday Heroes*, and the culminating essay is a narrative-style “Portrait of a Hero.” Students could edit their final projects for publication and/or perform their pieces at an open-mic event at the library.

**Literature Circles:** The emergence of literature circles and book clubs in school settings over the last thirty years is just one of the many manifestations of the philosophical shift in literacy instruction. In a format where every student is given a voice, a chance to talk, the sky is the limit in terms of meaning-making. Consider creating a space (and ordering multiple copies of high-interest, developmentally appropriate novels) for developmental literature circles.

**Bookmarks:** When I facilitate literature circles, I create custom bookmarks for the participants. On the front of the bookmarks were the literature circle meeting dates and times, and on the back of the bookmarks were a set of “rescue prompts” for those moments when students felt “stuck.” I’m sharing these rescue prompt bookmarks as an example of the types of materials that could be made available in

libraries for students who find empowerment, confidence, and eventual independence through academic support and scaffolded activities:

### Ways to Talk About Books

- Discuss how something from the book reminds you of something from your own life or the lives of your friends and family.
- Explain why you agree or disagree with something that one of the characters did or said.
- Discuss how something from the book reminds you of something else you have read.
- Discuss how something from the book reminds you of something that is happening in the world/country/community right now or has happened in the past.
- Predict what might happen next in the book.
- Explain why you were surprised or disappointed by something that happened in the book.
- Find a theme in the book: black/white, rich/poor, men/women, family relationships, sex/romance, war, politics, crime... these are just a few possibilities!
- Ask about something that you don’t understand — a word or phrase in the book or something that happens in the plot.

A popular unattributed saying in community college administration is that *we can’t let the open door become a revolving door*. Another common axiom among developmental educators is that *developmental courses need to serve as launching pads, not holding pens*. I’ve also heard it said that *underprepared does not mean unable*. All of these sentiments stem from the belief that colleges owe these students a chance. Heck, we owe them a few chances, which is exactly why our new developmental courses are designed to be repeated if necessary without causing as much logistical mayhem as in the past. Postsecondary institutions are asking important questions about how well we are serving the students who need us the most, and I’m proud to be part of an academic community that is proactively addressing the situation. I’m especially grateful to have a library staff that is eager to work with developmental students and faculty.

Developmental students need to see their efforts form a trajectory to a tangible payoff, so I build my teaching practice around the practical utility of everything I ask my students to do. To earn true buy-in from developmental students, library services and programs need to fit into that trajectory. I tell my students that no matter what they do after our time together, I want them to be at a competitive advantage as a direct result of their developmental coursework. This absolutely includes their first visits to the library, their first experiences with academic inquiry, and their first (almost always) dreaded works-cited entries. I don’t meet too many students who are happy to have been placed

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into a developmental course, but lately I'm hearing more from students "on the other side" of it who are able to look back on the experience and feel grateful that it worked out that way. Let's aim for *all* students to feel gratitude, not bitterness, towards time spent in developmental coursework.

### Recommended Reading

The following list includes both seminal texts in the field of integrated reading and writing instruction as well as recent examples of integrated developmental curriculum implementation:

**Bartholomae, D., and Petrosky, A. R.** (1986). *Facts, artifacts, and counterfacts: Theory and method for a reading and writing course*. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook Heinemann.

**Goen, S., and Gillotte-Tropp, H.** (2003). Integrated reading and writing: A response to the basic writing crisis. *Journal of Basic Writing*, 22(2), 90-113. <http://wac.colostate.edu/jbw/v22n2/goen.pdf>

**Graham, S., and Hebert, M. A.** (2010). *Writing to read: Evidence for how writing can improve reading. A Carnegie Corporation Time to Act Report*. Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education. [http://carnegie.org/fileadmin/Media/Publications/WritingToRead\\_01.pdf](http://carnegie.org/fileadmin/Media/Publications/WritingToRead_01.pdf)

**Holschuh, J. P., and Paulson, E. J.** (2013). *The terrain of college developmental reading* [Invited white paper]. College Reading & Learning Association. <http://www.nade.net/site/documents/breaking%20news/TheTerrainofCollege91913.pdf>

**Jackson, J. M.** (2009). Reading-writing connection. In **Flippo, R. F., and Caverly, D. C.** (Eds.), *Handbook of college reading and study strategies research* (2nd ed., pp. 145-173). New York, NY: Taylor & Francis.

**National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.** (2000). *Report of the National Reading Panel. Teaching children to read: an evidence-based assessment of the scientific research literature on reading and its implications for reading instruction: Reports of the subgroups* (NIH Publication No. 00-4754). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office. <http://www.nichd.nih.gov/publications/pubs/nrp/pages/report.aspx>

**NCCCS Developmental Reading and English (DRE) Curriculum.** (2013, April). *SuccessNC.org*. [http://www.successnc.org/sites/default/files/initiative-docs/DRE%20Document%20Final%20Version%204.25.13.pdf\\_0.pdf](http://www.successnc.org/sites/default/files/initiative-docs/DRE%20Document%20Final%20Version%204.25.13.pdf_0.pdf)

**Quinn, K. B.** (2003). Teaching reading and writing as modes of learning in college: A glance at the past: A view to the future. In **N. Stahl and H. Boylan** (Eds.), *Teaching developmental reading* (pp. 331-349). Boston: Bedford/St. Martin Press.

*The Focal Point: Redesigning Developmental English Education in Virginia's Community Colleges.* (2011). Report of the Developmental English Redesign Team. Virginia Community College System. [http://old.vccs.edu/portals/0/contentareas/AcademicServices/VCCS\\_FocalPoint\\_CompleteDocument.pdf](http://old.vccs.edu/portals/0/contentareas/AcademicServices/VCCS_FocalPoint_CompleteDocument.pdf)

**Tierney, R. J., and Pearson, P. D.** (1983). Toward a composing model of reading. *Language Arts*, 60, 568-580. [https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/17470/ctrstreadeducepv01983i00043\\_opt.pdf?sequence=1](https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/bitstream/handle/2142/17470/ctrstreadeducepv01983i00043_opt.pdf?sequence=1)

**Tierney, R. J., and Shanahan, T.** (1991). Research on the reading-writing relationship: Interactions, transactions, and outcomes. In **R. Barr, M. L. Kamil, P. Mosenthal, and P. D. Pearson** (Eds.), *Handbook of reading research* (Vol. 2, pp. 246-280). New York: Longman. 📖

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## Reading Trends and College-Age Students: The Research, the Issues, and the Role of Libraries

by **Pauline Dewan** (Laurier/Nipissing Liaison Librarian, Wilfrid Laurier University, Waterloo, Ontario, Canada) [<pdewan@wlu.ca>](mailto:pdewan@wlu.ca)

For years many people have believed that reading for pleasure is a self-indulgent and escapist activity. Until the 1990s, few researchers actually studied the role of leisure reading in life. But studies from the last two decades demonstrate that recreational reading plays an essential — in fact, fundamental — role in our lives. Ironically, this knowledge comes at a time when large-scale surveys by the **National Endowment for the Arts (NEA)** show that reading has been declining in popularity for a couple of decades, particularly in the college-aged population. Those who teach liberal arts have witnessed firsthand this wane in enthusiasm for reading. But more recently, studies by the **Pew** foundation seem to contradict these anecdotal observations and the **NEA** findings. This article will explore what the

actual state of reading is on our college campuses, why reading is important for students, what barriers exist to leisure reading, whether reading on screens helps or hinders, and what academic libraries can do to help both readers and non-readers.

### The State of Reading in the College-Aged Population

**NEA** studies published in 2004, 2007, and 2009<sup>1</sup> suggest that although reading as a leisure activity dramatically declined over the course of 20 years, it had marginally increased again by 2009. In the 18-to-24-year-old category, the percentage of Americans who read a book in the previous year was 59.8 in 1982, 53.3 in 1992, 42.8 in 2002, and 51.7 in 2008. Although the last study shows a reversal in the downward trend, the percentage of 18- to 24-year olds who read a book in 2008 was still significantly lower than it was a quarter century before. The **NEA** based these numbers on pleasure reading (books not

required for school or work) as well as "literary" reading — which they define as fiction, plays, or poetry (highbrow or lowbrow). But even when respondents were asked whether they read any non-required book, the numbers were similar (59 percent in 1992, 52 percent in 2002, and 50.7 percent in 2008). The fact that over the course of two decades half the respondents indicated that they do not read books for pleasure is a cause for concern.

In 2014, **Pew** took its own snapshot of readers, and found that 79 percent of 18- to 29-year olds had read a book in the previous year, a statistic that remained almost unchanged from its study the previous year.<sup>2</sup> In five short years, 50.7 percent (**NEA**) changed to 79 percent (**Pew**). Why the dramatic increase? The question that **Pew** asked readers was slightly different than the one used by the **NEA**: "During the past 12 months, about how many books did you read either all or part of the way through?" As we can see, **Pew's** definition of reading a book is much broader than the **NEA's**. Respondents did not have to

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